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ABSTRACT

Despite much rhetoric, foreign language teacher education lacks a substantial research base. Teacher education programs in general consist of subject-matter coursework, general education requirements, and specialized educational content, domains that have remained relatively unchanged in two decades. However, recent reform movements may have a significant impact on each of these areas. The subject matter content varies somewhat among programs, with linguistics and English grammar courses predominating. The general education component may consist of generic courses in psychology, philosophy of education, and general teaching methods, with some field experiences in schools in a variety of subject areas. Fortunately, many large institutions can now offer specialized methods courses in foreign language teaching, but they are often taught by professionals with more traditional approaches. Certification standards vary from state to state, and not all states have reciprocal agreements. The language proficiency of teachers is a growing concern, and some states are considering using proficiency tests as required teacher assessment measures. Many states have also begun to require teacher testing in subject matter and teaching skills. There is much interest in teacher education reform and improvement. Now that public attention has turned toward teacher education, the critical missing factor is research. (MSE)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

ERIC Digest

November 1987

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Washington, D.C.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

Foreign Language Teacher Education

Prepared by Gilbert A. Jarvis and Elizabeth B. Bernhardt *November 1987*

The Status of Foreign Language Teacher Education Today

The rhetoric surrounding the preparation of foreign language teachers—like the teacher education rhetoric in general—has changed significantly in recent years. An optimistic interpretation of the renewed interest would be a hope that the next several years will see significant change in the preparation of foreign language teachers. As of now, however, Stern and Strevens (1983) are still correct in their conclusion that "we lack an established theory of teacher education, that research is sparse, that some major differences of view persist, and that even the main issues are not yet sharply defined" (p.1). A recent survey by Bernhardt and Hammadou (1987) revealed that the entire population of published documents dealing with foreign language teacher education since 1976 consisted of only 78 articles. Of these articles a mere eight reported empirical data. Bernhardt and Hammadou conclude that the research base in foreign language education consists of "the perceptions of experienced foreign language educators...rather than (of) a principled collection of data and information" (p.293) on effective teacher education. In other words, the research base consists of "craft" knowledge learned by trial-and-error experience (Jarvis, 1983).

Components of Foreign Language Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs in foreign language consist, in general, of subject-matter coursework, general education requirements, and specialized education content. These domains have remained relatively unchanged over the past two decades. Recent reform movements in American education, however, characterized by position papers such as those of the Carnegie Commission, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (1986), and The Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group* (1986), will potentially have a major impact on the composition of each of these teacher education areas.

Subject Matter Content. Coursework for prospective foreign language teachers in the late 1980s consists principally of advanced literature and civilisation courses. These courses introduce students to the broad array of literary and cultural trends generally from historical and genre perspectives. One or two courses in composition and/or conversation and stylistics are usually included in the program. Unfortunately, hard data on the actual composition of this coursework from one foreign language teacher education program to another are unavailable (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987). However, data on teacher education programs in the teaching of English as a second language show that courses such as linguistics and English grammar predominate in these programs (Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty, 1985).

General Education Requirements. Teacher education programs also generally include generic courses in educational psychology, philosophy of education, and general methods. These courses give potential teachers skills in classroom management, mainstreaming, and the management of public school systems. The general education requirement may also include field experiences in schools in a variety of grade and subject matter areas; these experiences help future teachers develop a sense for the public school system on a variety of dimensions and also help them understand the commitment they are undertaking in becoming public school teachers.

Specialized Education Content. Fortunately, many large institutions are now able to offer specialized methods courses in foreign language teaching. This development is consistent with the Holmes recommendation for subject-matter pedagogy. These courses focus specifically on the delivery of language instruction at a variety of levels and to a variety of student populations. In addition, these institutions are able to offer field experiences and student teaching experiences supervised by foreign language teaching professionals. A less fortunate side, however, is that these courses are often taught by professionals who were trained during the audiolingual period and who may still view teacher education in terms of components such as the use of drilling and "culture capsules" rather than techniques in communicative language teaching.

Smaller institutions are frequently unable to offer specialized courses. These institutions are able to offer their students only general education courses and generic supervision. Frequently, the foreign language teacher training is delegated to an inservice teacher who is also the cooperating teacher in the student teaching experience, and the supervision of that experience is left to a university supervisor with no expertise in foreign language teaching.

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State Certification and Credentialing Systems

Certification standards vary from state to state, and not all states have reciprocal agreements; what one state acknowledges as competence in foreign language teaching another does not. Moreover, it has become increasingly clear within the past decade that what previously constituted "competence in foreign language teaching" is no longer viable. New research and new perspectives integrated from fields such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, artificial intelligence, and literary theory have relegated grammatical competence to subskill status. New skills and competencies are now being demanded of prospective teachers. By and large, these new skills are the focus of discussion among certification agencies.

The language proficiency of teachers is a growing concern at present. The Bernhardt and Hammadou survey found language proficiency as the main theme in over 30% of publications on teacher education and an adjunct theme in 17% of them (Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987). As of 1983, only 10 out of 50 states in the United States required prospective teachers to take an examination in any specialized area for certification. In fact, only in Massachusetts and Georgia are foreign language teachers required to demonstrate oral proficiency in the language in which they are seeking certification (Reschke, 1985). More recently, several states are beginning to discuss the implementation of oral proficiency requirements: Illinois, Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Missouri (Dragonas, 1987). Although Massachusetts has developed its own proficiency test, most other states are considering the use of the Foreign Service Institute Oral Proficiency Interview as a required assessment measure.

Oral proficiency is not the only concern of state certification agencies. More than forty states have enacted laws mandating teacher testing in subject matter as well as in teaching skills. The largest teacher testing program, the NTE, is administered by the Educational Testing Service. The National Teacher Examination (NTE) Program has clients nationwide. The National Examination consists of a "core battery of tests in communication skills, general knowledge, and professional knowledge" (Asfar, 1987). In addition, in foreign language, the NTE has specialty area tests in French, Spanish, and German. These tests evaluate primarily grammatical and cultural knowledge—not communicative ability. A pedagogical knowledge component is under development.

Looking Toward the Future of Foreign Language Teacher Education

Bernhardt and Hammadou (1987) point out the irony in the lack of attention to secondary school teacher development in the past decades. In their survey, they found that the preponderence of discussion in teacher education had focused on the graduate teaching assistant and university professor level. They state: "Considering that most foreign language teaching in the U.S. is done at the secondary level, this is a disturbing finding" (p.293). Yet, as we come to the end of the decade, the foreign language profession has begun to attend to teacher education at the secondary level. Hence, the future for reform and improvement is bright. The critical factor, now that public attention has been turned toward teacher education, is research: research on the most appropriate distribution of content coursework, on field placement and experience, on the topic sequence in methods courses in communicative language teaching, and on supervision. A database in these areas will provide a powerful vehicle for the education of sophisticated foreign language teachers for the 21st century.

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For Further Reading

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